

Training Your Minds

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An elephant trainer came to see the Buddha one time and, after listening to the teachings, he said, “Elephants are easy. Human beings are hard.” Elephants don’t have that many tricks, that many ways of being disobedient, but human beings are very complex.

When we talk about the mind being like a committee, sometimes it seems like that’s too small an image. It’s more like a crowd, and lots of people in the crowd have different agendas. So as you’re meditating, you have to realize that even though part of the mind is with the breath, there are other parts that don’t want to be with the breath and they’ll do what they can to sabotage the concentration you’ve got going, so you’ve got to be very careful. On the one hand, it means you have to look after the concentration very carefully, because in the beginning it’s going to be very fragile. On the other hand, you’ve got to learn how to deal with those different members. Sometimes you can simply push them aside. Other times, you have to look at them. Where are they coming from?

I know when I first started meditating, I had all these voices in my mind saying that I shouldn’t be doing this, that it was selfish, that it was futile or whatever. And I began to track them down: Where do those voices come from? Some were opinions I had learned from my parents. Some from my teachers. Some from the media. Some from friends from school. And the question I had to keep asking is, “What do they know as compared to the Buddha?” Of course, part of the mind was wondering, “Well, what did the Buddha know? After all, he lived a long time ago. Society wasn’t as advanced then as it was now.” Those are things that the different members of the committee can say. But you have to keep looking at the possibility that, as the Buddha said, we can put an thorough end to suffering. There should be at least one part of the mind that’s determined to see that through, to see if it really is possible. That’s the part you’ve got to nurture.

As for the other ones, as I said, sometimes you push them aside. Sometimes you have to investigate them: where they’re coming from, where they go. If you followed a particular line of thought, where would it lead you? Do you really want to identify with that?

Another way to deal with these things is to focus on a meditation topic you find interesting.

One of the reasons I liked the Ajaan Lee method was because it made the breath interesting. Prior to that, the breath was just in out, in out, in out,

especially when they told you not to adjust it, not to make any changes, just be with the breath as it was. It got pretty boring, and you began to wonder what it was accomplishing. Whereas when you're working with the breath, even if concentration isn't really great, at least you can say, "I'm at least working with getting acquainted with the body, how the body feels from within. Getting the breath energy to flow a little bit better should at least be good for my health."

In other words, at first you're not here so much to get concentration. You're here to learn about the breath. The concentration will come without your having to think about it. If the topic is interesting, if the theme is interesting, you don't have to worry about whether you're getting into the first jhana or whatever. You're learning about the topic, and that's one way to win some of those voices over to your side.

Then, of course, there are the ones that say, "Well, your concentration is miserable. Why even try?" But you have to remember: Where does good concentration come from? It comes from mediocre concentration, even from miserable concentration. The fact that you have some concentration is the seed. Learn how to nurture that. Even though the seed doesn't seem ready to sprout quite yet, just keep watering it, looking after it, and have the attitude that every little bit of something good has to be good.

So watch out for the voices that tend to undercut your efforts, that are hypercritical about them. They're not your friends. They may sound like they're speaking with the voice of the Dhamma, but you know that old saying about how the devil can quote scripture to his purpose. Well, the defilements can quote Dhamma for their purpose, too, so don't be fooled by them.

And remember that this is a long-term process. We talk a lot about heedfulness, about being ready to die at any point. The thing about death is that even if you die in the process of practicing, the practice gives you a momentum that bodes well for where you're going, much better than if you just give up. That doesn't bode well for anything at all.

So take stock of the fact that your mind is complex, and it's many minds. You get one mind to be concentrated for a while, and you find out there's another mind that wants to destroy it, and another mind that's indifferent. There are lots of different minds in there. The more of them that you can convert, then the more you can understand, and the better off you'll be.

This is why concentration meditation is a long-term project. You'll be dealing with many different voices inside, and you have to learn the right technique for dealing with each of them. You can't say, "Well, I'm just going to deal with greed as one big defilement and take care of all forms of greed all at once." Greed comes

in many different guises. Anger comes in many different guises. Delusion comes in many different forms. And you're going to have to learn how to deal with them all.

After a while, in some cases once you've dealt with one, it'll be easier to deal with another, but there are other cases where a particular defilement takes on an entirely new form, and you've got to figure out how it's coming from a different angle. So you need to have the kind of patience that sees things through—not the patience that says, “Well, however long it takes, I don't care,” and then stop trying. That's not really patience. You want the patience that keeps at it, keeps at it, keeps at it, and can keep nourishing itself, learning how to use your heedfulness in the right way. The heedfulness that says “I've got to get things done right now” has its place, but the heedfulness that says “I've got to do these things carefully if I want to do them well; it may take time”—that has its place, too.

So even though your mind is a lot more complex than an elephant doesn't mean that it's beyond your capacity to train it, simply that you've got to realize the complexity involved. The many ins and outs, the many identities your mind takes on are there not as an obstacle—think of them more as a challenge and that you're up for the challenge.

In one of Ajaan Mun's talks toward the end of his life, he compared meditation to a battle, and the different qualities you need in meditation were the different weapons and the food that the soldier needs. The soldier himself is your determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of your defilements ever again. It's also the determination to make sure that you're up for that, that you really believe that you can do it. Without that confidence, the soldier's going to get nowhere.

So keep working on your confidence that no matter how intricate and complicated the mind may be, it's a puzzle that can be solved.